

METAFICTION

Yaël Schlick



the NEW CRITICAL IDIOM



METAFICTION

Metafiction explores the great variety and effects of this popular genre and style, variously defined as a type of literature that philosophically questions itself, that repudiates the conventions of literary realism, that questions the relationship between fiction and reality, or that lies at the border between fiction and non-fiction. Yaël Schlick surveys a wide range of metafictional writings by diverse authors, with particular focus on the contemporary period.

This book asks not only what metafiction is but also what it can do, examining metafictional narratives' usefulness for exploring the role of art in society, its role in conceptualizing the figure of author and the reader of fiction, its investigation and playfulness with respect to language and linguistic conventions, and its troubling of the boundaries between fact and fiction in historiographic metafiction, autofiction, and autotheory.

Metafiction is an engaging and accessible introduction to a pervasive and influential form and concept in literary studies, and will be of use to all students of literary studies requiring a depth of knowledge in the subject.

Yaël Schlick is Professor of English at Queen's University in Ontario, Canada. Her research and teaching focus on travel writing, autobiography, American poetry, and contemporary fiction. She is the author of *Feminism and the Politics of Travel After the Enlightenment* (2012), co-editor of *Refiguring the Coquette* (2008), and translator of Victor Segalen's *Essay on Exoticism* (2002).

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***Dedicated in loving memory to my mother,
Salomeia Schlick (1933–2020).***



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INTRODUCTION

An author boards a train, only to run into his own fictional protagonist: what shall I do with him, he wonders. For no reason that you can see, a story you are reading digresses to discuss the use of italics in fiction stories, and tells you that realism is an *illusion*. Part way through a different novel, page 132 suddenly introduces you to a new narrator who, like you, has read up to page 131 of the same narrative. A poem you are reading seems to address itself to you, chastising you for not paying attention and missing its point. The author of an autobiography begins to talk about herself as a female character.

All these are examples of metafiction. But metafictionality has been variously defined. It has been understood as a type of literature that demonstrates philosophical tendencies, literature that repudiates and questions the conventions of literary realism, literature that questions the relationship between fiction and reality, and literature that is located at the border between fiction and criticism or other discourses. Metafiction's resurgence in the contemporary period has been linked to poststructuralist theories that have, since the 1960s, increasingly reflected on the nature of narrative, representation, and meaning-making. It has also been linked to postmodernist

tendencies in contemporary writing that began with modernism. And it tends to be highly intertextual, aware of literary tradition and its own place within it. While some theorists of metafiction have seen it as a peculiarly postmodern phenomenon, others have stressed that metafiction is a transhistorical element in fiction, dependent on the reader's interpretive perceptions. The purpose of this chapter is to explore some of these definitions and their contexts and to argue that metafiction is ultimately better understood by its effects than by its essence, by what it does rather than by what it is. Subsequent chapters will therefore explore what metafiction is and what it can do, examining metafictional narratives' usefulness for exploring the role of art in society (Chapter 1), its role in conceptualizing the figure of author and the figure of the reader of fiction (Chapter 2), its investigation and playfulness with respect to language and the possibilities of fiction (Chapter 3), its troubling of the boundaries between historical fact and fiction in what is known as historiographic metafiction (Chapter 4), and, finally, its influence in the questioning of generic boundaries seen in autofictional writing that, like historiographic metafiction, questions distinctions between fiction and non-fiction (Chapter 5). These chapters will address metafictionality in diverse types of texts, including not only prose fiction, but also metapoetry, metatheatre, and autofiction. Though certainly not all literature is metafictional, metafictionality today is pervasive, even natural, and the aim of the present volume will be to explore its variety and permutations in the contemporary period.

DEFINING METAFICTION

Writing in the context of renewed experimentation in American fiction in the 1960s, William Gass was the first to use the term "metafiction" in his essay "Philosophy and the Form of Fiction" (1970). In doing so, he hoped to align developments in the novel and short story with similarly self-reflexive tendencies in other disciplines like philosophy, writing that "the novelist and the philosopher are companions in a common enterprise" (Gass, 1970: 5), both are "obsessed with language, and make themselves up out of concepts", both of them "create worlds" (Gass, 1970: 4). For Gass,

the “mature novel” is philosophical in nature (Gass, 1970: 26); it uses the medium of language not to render a world, but to make one from those already existing “forms of fiction” (Gass, 1970: 24–25). Just as there are “metatheorems in mathematics and logic, ethics has its linguistic oversoul, everywhere lingos to converse about lingos are being contrived,” writes Gass, “the case is no different in the novel,” where “forms of fiction serve as the material upon which further forms can be imposed” (Gass, 1970: 24–25).

In privileging the text’s creation of, rather than rendering of, a world and in emphasizing its medium of language, Gass highlights what will be taken up in subsequent definitions of metafiction: namely, its repudiation of realism and its proximal relation to other discourses such as philosophy, with which it shares a medium and a practice. In signalling the metafictional turn of the novel as a culminating point of its development (its maturity), Gass also echoes John Barth’s discussion of fiction’s much-needed revitalization by means of self-reflection in “The Literature of Exhaustion” (1967). This essay contends that fiction has pushed through and rejuvenated itself through this new frontier; it has moved beyond its “used-upness” precisely by representing representation and thus, through such self-reflexiveness, has managed to renew itself. For both Gass and Barth much of this newness in fiction is indebted to the work of Jorge Luis Borges, whose *Labyrinths* was first published in English in 1962, with earlier stories appearing in translation throughout the 1950s. Borges, they argue, pushed fiction into the philosophical domain and emphasized its ability to reflect on itself. His story “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*” perfectly illustrates for Barth metafiction’s power to create new forms from old ones.

In that story, we are told of the genius of one Pierre Menard. His “visible” work appears identical to Miguel de Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*. But his “invisible” work is in fact richer, or so we are told by the narrator, purportedly a literary critic hoping to rectify Menard’s reputation as an innovator and no mere copyist. It is Menard’s “admirable intention ... to produce a few pages which would coincide—word for word and line for line—with those of Miguel de Cervantes” (Borges, 1964c: 39). While

appearing identical, we are told, the meaning of their texts is not the same:

It is a revelation to compare Menard's *Don Quixote* with Cervantes'. The latter, for example, wrote (part one, chapter nine):

... truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future's counselor.

Written in the seventeenth century, written by the "lay genius" Cervantes, this enumeration is a mere rhetorical praise of history. Menard, on the other hand, writes:

... truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future's counselor.

(Borges, 1964c: 43)

Menard's style is archaic in comparison with Cervantes's use of the current Spanish of his time; his reference in the twentieth century to "truth, whose mother is history" is "astounding" in not defining "history as an inquiry into reality but as its origin" (Borges, 1964c: 43). Menard's genius, Borges tells us in this mock story of literary interpretation, is to offer the new technique of the "deliberate anachronism and the erroneous attribution", a technique dependent on the "art of reading," not on the words of the text (Borges, 1964c: 44). The different meanings of these identical texts, in other words, are owed to its differing interpretation.

Borges's story is metafictional in Gass's terms to the extent that it does not "render the world" but makes one from the medium of language (Gass, 1970: 24); like Menard, Borges creates new forms from those already in existence (Gass, 1970: 25). For Barth, this story demonstrates how literature can renew itself, pull itself up by its own bootstraps by using existing fiction (Cervantes's) to create new fiction (Menard's, and also, of course, Borges's). Borges, writes Barth, admirably "confronts an intellectual dead end and employs it against itself to accomplish new human work" (qtd. in Currie, 1995: 166). Borges's metafiction also unsettles

generic conventions in posing as a piece of literary criticism—is it a fictional story or an essay of literary criticism? It additionally unsettles interpretive ones in locating meaning in the reader rather than in the words of the text and in challenging the hierarchies of literary history that would have Menard relegated to invisibility as a mere imitator (or plagiarist) of Cervantes's work. A fiction, this short story explores questions of interpretation, history, meaning, and language, and problematizes the boundaries between fiction and reality, as well as between literature and criticism.

As writers about (but also of) fiction, William Gass and John Barth put these ideas about metafiction into practice in their own writing to reinvigorate a literature they felt had exhausted its possibilities. Barth's story sequence *Lost in the Funhouse*—itself in intertextual conversation with past canonical works by Homer, Laurence Sterne, Joyce, and others—depicts the life of his writer-protagonist Ambrose and begins with that most clichéd of openings: "Once upon a time." Except that here these words appear along the edge of the page, and the reader is given instructions about how to cut out the strip of two-dimensional paper, twist it once, and reattach it, thus combining the two phrases printed on either side of the same page: the first phrase is "once upon a time"; the second "there was a story that began" (Barth, 1988b: 1–2). Together they make up the "Frame-Tale" of Barth's short story sequence. This endless story now reads: "once upon a time there was a story that began once upon a time there was a story that began once upon a time there was a story that began once upon..." and so on. A Möbius strip, put together by the reader, this story is a never-ending beginning. Like Borges, Barth takes an existing and worn phrase as the point of departure for his innovation, transforms an old convention into something new, turns the reader into an active agent and co-creator of the story's making, and plunges this same reader into the dizzying and perhaps inextricable world of the text. We might periodize these writings by Gass and Barth as part of postmodern writing's beginnings, representing the continued process of renewing or extending the project of modernism. As such, metafiction might be fruitfully considered as a hinge between modernism and postmodernism, beginning the process of postmodernism's extensive use of self-consciousness,

self-reflexivity, and intertextuality to pose questions about such issues as the nature of reality, the role of narrative and literary conventions, the construction of meaning, and the use of popular cultural forms.

METAFICTION AND LITERARY REALISM

In *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Erich Auerbach charts the history of realism into the early twentieth century, examining each age's mode of seeing and representing reality. His final chapter focuses on modernism, "which dissolves reality into multiple and multivalent reflections of consciousness," responding as it does to "a Europe unsure of itself, overflowing with unsettled ideologies and ways of life, and pregnant with disaster" (Auerbach, 1953: 551). Metafiction is a later development of this same historical trajectory, one which, in particular, amplifies the challenges of representation. But even as historical discussions of metafiction address its pointed departure from literary realism and modernism alike, critics have also argued that it may be found across literary history. And, like the narrator of "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*", they have also explored metafictionality as a product of interpretation dependent on the activity of the reader rather than a quality inherent in a text, and as a mode of writing that engages intertextually with and is dependent upon other literary works. In her influential 1984 study of metafiction, Patricia Waugh makes clear that "metafiction is a tendency or function inherent in *all* novels," and is worth studying not simply because of its resurgence in contemporary writing, but also because "of the insights it offers into both the representational nature of all fiction and the literary history of the novel as genre" (Waugh, 1984: 5). Her own definition of metafiction paraphrases Robert Alter's definition in *Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre*, where he argues that "a self-conscious novel, briefly, is a novel that systematically flaunts its own condition of artifice and that by so doing probes into the problematic relationship between real-seeming artifice and reality" (Alter, 1975: x). Like Alter's, Waugh's definition seeks to distinguish properly metafictional works from ones that have metafictional tendencies by emphasizing that metafiction "is a

term given to fictional writing which *self-consciously* and *systematically* draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (Waugh, 1984: 2, my emphasis). Both Alter and Waugh emphasize metafiction’s role in exploring the boundary between fiction and reality, and, in so doing, view metafiction as an important contestation of the conventions of literary realism. Metafiction’s examination of its own “methods of construction,” writes Waugh, also means that it explores “the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text” (Waugh, 1984: 2). Metafiction’s very questioning of the boundary between the fictional and the real, that is, affects not only our understanding of literary texts and literary history, but extends to metaphysical questions about the nature of reality itself.

Waugh’s detailed analysis of metafiction explores a variety of strategies used by metafictional texts—such as framing and frame-breaking, appropriations of popular genres, and parody—that disrupt realist discourse. Like Gass, Waugh addresses developments in other disciplinary fields, such as linguistics, philosophy, and sociology in order to show how pervasive questions about the nature of our reality and our role in constructing and mediating it have both led to and were expressed alongside tendencies among fiction writers to reflect on the nature of reality also; and, in doing so, to question realism as a style capable of representing the world as it is. Waugh’s formulation of metafiction remains elastic and useful, allowing for a sliding scale of metafictional practices; it moves from works that explore fictionality as a theme, to those that display “formal and ontological insecurity” but ultimately recontextualize such uncertainties, and finally, to works that “reject realism more thoroughly” and whose fabrications “posit the world as a fabrication of competing semiotic systems which never correspond to material conditions” (Waugh, 1984: 19). Like Gass and Barth, she views metafiction’s self-consciousness as testimony to the novel’s mature state, its “recognition of its existence as *writing*” (Waugh, 1984: 19). Generally, she sees postmodern fiction as coterminous with the flowering of metafictional writing in the twentieth century, and views the most thoroughly metafictional works as mature to the extent of the thoroughness of their rejection of realism.

Recent metafictional as well as discussions of post-postmodernism have raised questions about the extent to which metafiction must necessarily reject literary realism. Indeed, Waugh makes clear the way in which metafictional of the 1960s and 1970s rely on realism to build their fictional worlds even as they trouble the readers' reliance on the stability of such worlds. In posing questions about knowledge and interpretation, metafiction can also be said to echo or represent very real philosophical and cultural concerns and so to mirror the historical conditions of the period in which they are written. The discussion of recent historiographic metafictional and works of autofiction in Chapters 4 and 5 of this volume will make clear how recent metafictional techniques draw importantly on and critique the realist tradition to make their point, and show how contemporary metafictional and postmodern writing today strives to newly engage with the material conditions of life. As Robert McLaughlin has argued, post-postmodern writers have retained the postmodern "fascination with representation, the layers of text, discourse, narrative, and image that construct our experience of the world" while aiming "to reconnect with something beyond representation, something extralinguistic, something real" (McLaughlin, 2012: 213). We can see this tendency in recent works like *Pym* by Mat Johnson or *Trust Exercise* by Susan Choi (discussed in Chapter 1), which take up pressing political questions pertaining to race and to gender all the while deploying postmodern metafictional devices.

METAFICTION AND CRITICAL DISCOURSE

Periodization in discussions of metafiction, despite acknowledged metafictional tendencies in *all* periods of literature, is useful to keep in mind as a way of discerning the development and intensification of metafictional approaches to fiction from the latter half of the twentieth century to the present. But important characterizations of metafiction have also emphasized its relationship to criticism and critical discourse rather than its reaction to earlier literary styles. Focus on metafiction as a kind of literature that integrates commentary about fiction into its own structure began right at the point that the term "metafiction" was coined. In his 1970 article on metafiction, Robert Scholes explores how

metafiction “assimilates all the perspectives of criticism into the fictional process itself” (Scholes, 1970: 106). (We can see this tendency in Borges’s story “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*.”) And in her discussion of “narcissistic narrative,” Linda Hutcheon defines metafiction as “fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and / or linguistic identity” (Hutcheon, 1980: 1). She sees it as constituting “its own first critical commentary,” and as a kind of writing in which “the distinction between literary and critical texts begins to fade” (Hutcheon, 1980: 6, 15). Such discussions of fiction’s assimilation of and relationship to criticism form the central focus of Mark Currie’s insightful examination of the philosophical underpinnings and historical trajectory of contemporary metafiction. He argues that metafiction is neither a kind of fiction nor does it have an essence. Rather, metafiction is a “borderline discourse” that can be understood as a composite of “inherent characteristics and critical interpretations” (Currie, 1995: 16). It is situated at the boundary between fiction and criticism (Currie, 1995: 2).

Currie’s repositioning of metafiction and its definition is part of his exploration of the principle sources of linguistic self-consciousness in the self-referential emphasis of literary modernism and Saussurean linguistics (Currie, 1995: 6). He also examines how contemporary metafiction’s dissolving of the boundaries between fiction and criticism echoes the way that poststructuralist writing traversed conventional boundaries between literary and critical / philosophical language. This can be seen in Jacques Derrida’s work, where “literature’s boundary with philosophy, linguistics and criticism is transgressed” (Currie, 1995: 8). Post-modernist metafictional writing, in other words, drew both on modernism and poststructuralism to create fictions that self-consciously commented on language and on diverse literary conventions within the fictional text itself. This definition of metafiction is agile enough to include works of diverse periods that rupture fictional illusion through explicit authorial interventions, or that dramatize the production and reception of art, or that are highly intertextual in nature. It also allows for metafictionality to be understood as the product of either literary self-consciousness or of critical renderings of self-reflexivity. His formulation

acknowledges the way “any definition of metafiction is a contradiction” precisely because metafiction’s commitment to the idea of constructed meanings implies that it cannot be rooted in any essential quality of narrative (Currie, 1995: 15). This definitional approach is not only applicable to metafictional texts generally, but is particularly apt for describing the kind of metafictional writing that is called historiographic metafiction and autofiction. In continuing to energize the meeting points of formerly separate or separable discourses and genres (fiction, history, autobiography), and in providing expansive meditations on the nature of representation itself, works of historiographic metafiction by such authors as Javier Cercas and Jonathan Safran Foer, and works of autofiction by such writers as Rachel Cusk and Carmen Maria Machado, might indeed be understood as metafictions. These late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century works take such nascent generic troubling of the kind we see in Borges’s mingling of fiction and literary criticism in “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*” and elaborate on it in order to make claims about a broad range of societal issues beyond the purely literary. They are borderline texts that insistently traverse boundaries and blend genres as a means of producing and provoking critical readings.

METAFICTION EXPANDED

In tandem with such evolving metafictional practices, writings about metafiction in recent decades have moved to accommodate expansions of the term metafiction, to move further away from thinking of metafiction as some essential quality that fiction possesses, and to focus on its questioning of the boundaries between fiction and criticism, as well as between fiction and other genres of writing. Developments in narratology, in particular, have focused attention not on fiction alone but on narrative practices across genres and media, and have used metafiction as a model for thinking about the construction of reality more generally. David Herman’s *Storytelling and the Sciences of the Mind* (2013), for example, explores how people make sense of stories and use them to make sense of their world. Metafiction’s self-reflexivity, its attention both to the scaffolding of fictional worlds and to

world-building, provides a particularly fruitful domain for such questions, and has allowed as well for descriptions of the experience of reading metafictional texts such as confusion, uncertainty, and the sense of a multidimensional reality.

We can see the usefulness of such cognitive approaches to metafiction for describing metafictionality's effects in both critical and metafictional works. In another of Borges's short stories called "The Garden of Forking Paths," a character by the name of Yu Tsun experiences a "swarming sensation" (*pululacion* in the Spanish, Borges, 1997: 117) as the various temporal levels of narration intermingle. Yu Tsun experiences this swarming sensation as he hears about a complex narrative composed by his own ancestor, Ts'ui Pên, from an English sinologist by the name of Stephen Albert. Ts'ui Pên had written a work whose subject is time and which is (like Borges's story) called *The Garden of Forking Paths*. This novel, Albert tells Yu Tsun, offers "an incomplete, but not false, image of the universe as Ts'ui Pên conceived it," representing "an infinite series of times, in a growing, dizzying net of divergent convergent and parallel times" (Borges, 1964b: 28). Yu Tsun, who is a spy, has come to Albert's house in the English countryside in a desperate attempt to signal the name of the city called Albert to his superiors in Berlin. He had no notion, prior to arriving at Albert's house, of the intriguing connections between this English sinologist and the work of his own Chinese ancestor. As he listens to Albert discussing Ts'ui Pên's masterpiece, Yu Tsun begins to sense all the possible universes that he and Albert inhabit: "It seemed to me that the humid garden that surrounded the house was infinitely saturated with invisible persons. Those persons were Albert and I, secret, busy and multiform in other dimensions of time" (Borges, 1964b: 28). The reader of this story, who is also reading about *The Garden of Forking Paths* in "The Garden of Forking Paths," feels their boundaries overrun and uncertain, the embedded narrative levels of the story no longer clearly discernable. This sensation of swarming is surely akin to Currie's description of the metafictional text's effects as the creation of "moments of critical vertigo in which the relations between real life and representation are no longer clear, either within or beyond the fiction" (Currie, 1995:

21), an effect achieved by the story's complex embedding of narratives within narratives and its troubling of fixed narrative time.

Recent explorations of the rhetorical figure of metalepsis, defined by John Pier as a "deliberate transgression between the world of the telling and the world of the told" (Pier, 2016a), have been important for discussing the relations between such different levels of narrative that are a central feature of metafiction (Barth's Möbius strip story is a good example of this phenomenon as is the narrative embedding in "The Garden of Forking Paths"), and theorists like Gérard Genette (in *Métalepses* 2004) and Marie-Laure Ryan (in "Metaleptic Machines" 2006) have elaborated typologies to explore the nature of the interactions between these different narrative levels and worlds. Ryan, for example, distinguishes between a brief intermingling of levels that is followed by the reassertion of boundaries between levels, which she calls rhetorical metalepsis, and ontological metalepsis, which "opens a passage between levels that results in their interpenetration, or mutual contamination" (Ryan, 2006: 207). These typologies build on notions of frame-creation and frame-breaking analysed by Erving Goffman in *Frame Analysis* (1972) and used by critics like Waugh to explore the alternation of the construction and destruction of illusion in metafictional works (Waugh, 1984: 29–34). They are helpful as a means of analysing and describing the intricacies of metafictional works and understanding their effects. Recent explorations of metalepsis also build on theorizations of narrative embedding in literary texts examined by such critics as Lucien Dällenbach in *The Mirror and the Text* (1989), Ross Chambers in *Story and Situation* (1984), and Brian McHale in *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987). The concept of metalepsis is useful not only for analysing literary works; it is also a means of articulating the structure and effects of diverse works in different media, and, as such, applicable beyond literary writing to a broader range of texts and representations.

The same applies to recent usage of terms like metanarration and metareference. While metafiction is fiction about fiction, metanarrative is, more broadly, narrative utterances about narrative (Birgit Neuman and Ansgar Nünning, 2012). Metanarrative is by no means a new term, but like metalepsis, was used by

critics like Genette and Dällenbach for literary works predominantly. The term metareference (in lieu of metafiction, or self-referentiality, or self-reflexivity) can likewise be used more broadly, beyond the realm of literature, to discuss self-reference in all media or medial artifacts. In his discussion of the “metareferential turn,” Werner Wolf explores interesting examples of metareference in such popular forms as film and children’s books, such as *Shrek the Third* and David Weisner’s *The Three Little Pigs* (Wolf, 2011: 9–15). Though literary critics and theorists are in a privileged position to explore contemporary meta-phenomena according to Wolf, there is still some reluctance on the part of scholars to “look across boundaries” and especially “medial boundaries” (Wolf, 2009: 4–5) to explore meta-phenomena. Though the present volume will focus primarily on literary narratives, it will also explore the instances and contexts that have expanded the parameters of metafiction, and, in addressing the question of what metafiction can *do*, will examine the functions of what Wolf has called “metaization” (Wolf, 2011: 4) as both a literary and cultural phenomenon.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

The five chapters of this volume explore different aspects of metafictional writing and different metafictional tendencies. While discussing some important classic metafictional works, they also examine more recent writing to discern new tendencies and developments in self-conscious narratives. Chapter 1 begins with a consideration of a variety of short stories and novels that blur the boundary between fiction and reality and between literature and criticism. It then examines the means by which such texts do so, focussing on narrative embedding, intertextuality, and paratextuality, and examining the workings of these metafictional strategies in three contemporary novels: Manuel Puig’s *The Kiss of the Spider Woman*, Mat Johnson’s *Pym*, and Susan Choi’s *Trust Exercise*. These works demonstrate metafiction’s power to produce valuable critique, to involve readers in questioning societal values, and to turn the space of the novel into a space co-extensive with our lived and readerly experience.

Chapter 2 turns its attention to the figures of the author and the reader as elaborated in metafictional texts and in literary theory alike to explore the production and reception of narratives. It explores the parallels between developments in literary theory and metafictional representations of authors and readers, both of which explore what Roland Barthes has characterized as “the death of the author,” the reader’s active role in creating the text, and the text’s plurality of meaning. The metafictional texts considered in this chapter centrally represent the author and the reader (as in David Foenkinos’s *The Mystery of Henry Pick*), address the reader directly (as in John Ashbery’s “Paradoxes and Oxymorons”), and make explicit demands on the reader’s experience and interpretive powers (as in Ali Smith’s *How to Be Both*). In so doing these works explore the kinds of issues raised in reader-response criticism, in Roland Barthes’s and Michel Foucault’s considerations of the author figure, and, more recently, in postcritical considerations of the activities of reading and interpreting.

Chapter 3 turns to the material that makes up texts: language. It explores texts that are metafictional by dint of commenting on their own language and its ability to reference the real world (as in John Barth’s “Ambrose His Mark” or in several stories by Lydia Davis), and texts that, through language games, highlight the artifice of linguistic and literary conventions (as in Lynn Hejinian’s *My Life*, Walter Abish’s *Alphabetical Africa*, and Christian Bök’s *Eunoia*). These latter antimimetic or “unnatural” narratives foreground the text’s artifice and extend literary forms and possibilities through creative linguistic play. Their “pre-elaborated and *voluntarily* imposed systems of artifice” demonstrate that “all literature is fundamentally combinatoric in character” (Motte 1986: 11; Motte 2009a: 723). The chapter concludes by examining Jacques Jouet’s *Subway Poems* and Julio Cortázar and Carol Dunlop’s *Autonauts of the Cosmoroute*, works that extend literary and linguistic play out into the experience of everyday life to explore its enriching potential. Such works extend Hejinian’s desire to jam the ideology of language as a system through practices that resist societal structuration of urban life and travel experiences with the aim of finding new spaces of meaning.

Chapter 4 explores the crisis of representation that led to the questioning of notions of historical truth and to historiographic metafiction as a kind of historical novel that addresses such problems of reference in its very narrative. The chapter discusses the philosophical and cultural debates that brought about this new type of historical novel and details the salient features and strategies of historiographic metafiction. The chapter concludes with an analysis of two recent historiographic metafictions: Javier Cercas's *Soldiers of Salamis*, which takes the Spanish Civil War as its historical subject, and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*, a text that explores the way our relationship to the historical past is mediated by writing. The final Chapter 5, on autofiction and autotheory, similarly examines questions of reference and explores a new kind of autobiographical writing that questions the assumptions of classic autobiography and that, like historiographic metafiction, blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction to highlight the role of language and writing. Older autofictional texts like Roland Barthes's *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* are examined alongside recent works by Alison Bechdel, Rachel Cusk, Karl Ove Knausgaard, Carmen Maria Machado, and Deborah Levy to showcase diverse and new modes of self-writing as theorizations of subjectivity. In all these discussions, metafictional texts are understood as being themselves critical and theoretical commentary, as they insistently blur and question the boundary lines between fact and fiction, art and art criticism.

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